



Wallkill River and Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuges Planning Update

Fall 1999

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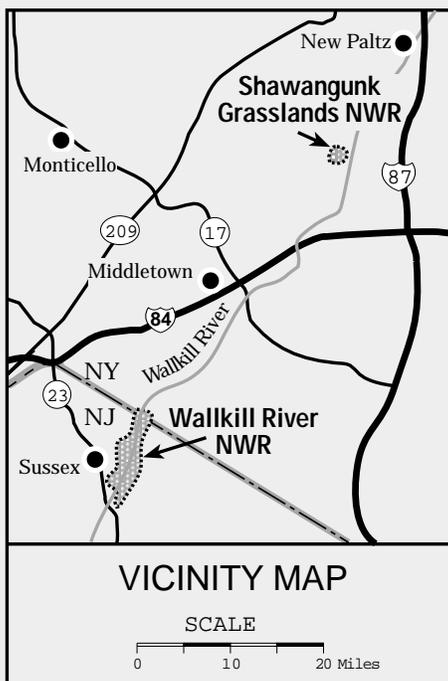
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Planning Schedule:

- January 2000: develop management alternatives, including the "proposed action"
- May 2000: Release and distribute Draft CCP/ Environmental Assessment
- June 2000: Public Meeting on Draft Plan
- October 2000: Release and distribute Final CCP/Environmental assessment



A portly muskrat enjoys some lunch while awaiting the release of the Wallkill River NWR and Shawangunk Grasslands NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plans. Photo by K & L Brown



The Plan...

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is continuing work on long-term management plans for the Wallkill River and the Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs). We will be developing Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCPs) – practical guides for managing the Refuges over the next 15 years.

The Process...

As an important part of this planning process, we have been gathering input from the public, conservation organizations, organized user groups, and state/local government agencies. This newsletter will bring you up-to-date on the comments we have gathered thus far.

Thanks for your comments!

Public comments help us evaluate current management, envision desired future conditions on the Refuge, conduct effective outreach, and get a feel for important issues. We have summarized your comments from the May and June Open Houses, which were held in Vernon and Sparta, NJ, and in Wallkill and Warwick, NY. We continue to meet with local municipalities, civic groups, and state agencies.

Most of you received a newsletter and Planning Workbook this past spring. The Workbooks were designed to give you an opportunity to share your thoughts on issues affecting the Refuge. The majority of our public input so far has come from your responses to the Planning Workbooks, which were distributed to over 3,000 addresses on our mailing list.

Planning Workbook Responses

Refuge Goals:

The planning team has identified the following 7 goals, which will lend direction to the management alternatives set forth in the draft CCP.

- Protect and enhance populations of federal trust species* and other species and habitats of special management concern
- Manage regionally-significant ecological communities, including grasslands and wetlands
- Promote actions which contribute towards a healthier Wallkill River
- Continue land acquisition and land management partnerships to support accomplishment of species, habitat, and ecosystem goals
- Provide opportunities for high quality, compatible, wildlife-dependent use
- Cultivate an informed and educated public that works to support the purposes of the Refuges
- Provide Refuge staffing, operations, and maintenance support to effectively accomplish Refuge goals and objectives

* federal trust species are those protected through federal law or executive order. Migratory birds or threatened and endangered species are examples.



Chestnut-sided warbler. Photo by Scott A. Vincent

The following pages summarize the 314 completed Workbooks we received, which include comments on wildlife habitat management, public use, land protection, and the Service's role in local communities. We would especially like to thank each of you who took the time to complete the Planning Workbooks. A more comprehensive summary of responses is available upon request from the Refuge office.

Responses to most questions have been grouped in order to avoid redundancy. Other responses are presented numerically. However, please keep in mind that responses to the Planning Workbooks are not meant to imply statistical significance – responses represent the opinions only of those people who received and completed Workbooks. Responses do not represent current or future Service policy.

How many times each year do you visit the Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge? (297 responses)

| | |
|-----|-------------------|
| 41 | never |
| 118 | 1 - 5 visits/year |
| 98 | 5 - 25 |
| 28 | 25 - 50 |
| 13 | 50+ |

What are your favorite activities to engage in while visiting the Refuge? (Open-ended question; 272 responses)

| | | | |
|-----|----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| 138 | hunting | 4 | contemplation |
| 130 | observing wildlife/bird watching | 3 | educational/interp. programs |
| 114 | walking/hiking | 3 | volunteering |
| 48 | fishing | 2 | dog walking (1 from Galeville) |
| 25 | canoeing | 2 | biking |
| 17 | photography | 1 | trapping |
| 6 | flower identification | | |

With a larger perspective in mind, what do you value most about the Wallkill River Watershed? (Responses were grouped and reworded, but not quantified. Open-ended question; 284 responses)

- presence and diversity of wildlife
- affords wildlife habitat protection/preservation
- public access and public use opportunities (eg. hunting, fishing, env. education)
- water quality protection
- rural nature of the area; its natural beauty
- wildlands and open space protection and preservation for the future

What do you consider to be the most important problem facing the Wallkill River Watershed? (Open-ended question; 253 responses)

| | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------|---|--|
| 101 | development | 4 | lack of upkeep/maintenance of established areas |
| 48 | water quality | 4 | over population - people |
| 46 | pollution | 3 | access - too much |
| 25 | funding for the Refuge | 3 | low community involvement/lack of public support |
| 21 | loss of habitat | 2 | overhunting |
| 18 | access/usage - not enough | 2 | over population - deer |
| 17 | overuse | 1 | bear intrusion |
| 11 | littering | 1 | hunters (safety concerns) |
| 11 | negative perception of hunters | | |
| 6 | invasive species | | |
| 4 | illegal use (ATVs) | | |

Planning Workbook Responses

Key Issues:

Management issues and concerns raised by the planning team were combined with public comments in order to generate a "master list" of issues. Key issues were then derived from this master list. Key issues are those which: fall within the scope of the planning project, overlap or relate with other issues, and suggest different actions, mitigations, or alternatives.

1. How will the Refuge manage its species of special concern?
2. How will the Refuge manage for regionally significant ecological communities, including the Wallkill River and its associated wetlands?
3. How will the Refuge manage invasive, exotic, and overabundant species?
4. What hunting opportunities will be provided by the Refuge?
5. How will the Refuge provide opportunities for compatible, wildlife-dependent uses, realizing that these uses occasionally conflict?
6. What additional lands will the Refuge protect and/or acquire?
7. How will the Refuge cultivate an informed and educated public to support the Mission of the Service and the purposes for which the Refuge was established?
8. How will the Refuge obtain staffing and funding necessary to complete priority projects?
9. How will the Refuge protect, manage, and interpret its cultural resources?



Bobolink. Old fields at the Wallkill River NWR are mowed in order to keep the vegetation from succeeding to forest. Grasslands and grassland birds, such as this bobolink, are in decline throughout the Wallkill River Watershed due to development and succession. USFWS photo

What technical services would you like Refuge staff to provide to your local community?

Wallkill (248 responses) Shawangunk (89 responses)

| | | |
|--|-----|----|
| wetlands management | 167 | 54 |
| management of endangered species | 163 | 64 |
| grasslands restoration | 109 | 64 |
| management to benefit wildlife | 204 | 77 |
| land protection funding | 161 | 58 |
| control of invasive plant and animal species | 144 | 51 |
| volunteer opportunities | 137 | 51 |
| grants for habitat management | 129 | 49 |

Other responses (51 total):

- education for visitors, the community, and adjacent property owners
- trail development
- regular litter pick-up
- protection and patrol of illegal dumping and trashing
- update on research activities, eg. kestrel boxes
- none, unless requested
- environmental interpretation
- guest speakers in schools

Shawangunk:

- airspace management to restrict airport use for ultralights and "touch and go" training

Planning Workbook Responses

Wallkill River NWR Vision Statement

(revised based on public comments)

The Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) lies nestled between forested ridges in northwestern New Jersey and southeastern New York. We work to promote the biological integrity of the Wallkill River and associated habitats within the river valley. Our conservation focus includes management for grassland and wetland-dependent species. Special attention is also given to Federal and State listed threatened and endangered species.

Local communities realize economic and social benefits as visitors enjoy the Refuge's natural beauty and biological diversity. Visitors participate in a wide variety of wildlife-dependent activities including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. Through our educational and interpretative programs, people come to value the ecological significance of the Wallkill River Valley and the Refuge's importance as a link with other natural areas within the lower Hudson River ecosystem.

We value the support of conservation partners, the public, and The Friends of Wallkill River NWR, as we continue to acquire and manage exceptional wildlife areas for the benefit of the American people.

Shawangunk Grasslands NWR Vision Statement

The Shawangunk Grasslands NWR is an exceptional native grassland community located within the Wallkill River watershed. Our primary management emphasis is to sustain or enhance habitats for grassland-dependent migratory birds. Other grassland-dependent animals and rare and declining plants will benefit as well. With easy public access to managed grasslands, this Refuge provides an ideal setting for environmental education. The variety of compatible, wildlife-dependent recreational activities offered on the Refuge allows visitors to enjoy and appreciate this unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

What do you think of our Vision Statement? (Responses were grouped and reworded, but not quantified. Open-ended question; 110 responses)

- most said it "looked good," had "excellent ideas," and was "very comprehensive"
- too long
- identify "partners"
- Refuge is part of a corridor, as well as a stand-alone refuge
- expand on environmental education
- highlight hunting as a permitted activity
- clarify 3rd paragraph, "local municipalities and businesses..."
- what about Shawangunk/Galeville vision?
- mention Appalachian Trail

Additional comments on values, vision or the Service's role in your community. (Responses were grouped and reworded, but not quantified. Open-ended question; 114 responses)

- currently doing an excellent job; keep up the good work
- need aggressive land protection
- need increased environmental education for all ages
- Service needs to be more involved in all aspects of Wallkill River Watershed management (eg. wastewater treatment, water quality monitoring)
- need undeveloped wildlife corridor connections with Kittatinny Mtns and Highlands
- need protection of Shawangunk Ridge, adjacent to Refuge
- concern with tax loss
- open Refuge office on weekends
- hunting opportunities important; increase recreational waterfowl, small game, turkey
- consider user fees
- Refuge could be model for successful, multiple-use ecosystem management

Fish, Wildlife and Their Habitats

Are there specific areas within the Wallkill River Watershed that, in your opinion, need protection? If so, please list them here and explain why you think they are important. (Responses were grouped and reworded, but not quantified. Open-ended question; 100 responses)

Wallkill River Watershed, NJ:

- upstream farms
- woodcock habitat
- lands adjacent to Wallkill River, riparian corridor throughout its entire length
- Wildlife Conservation Society is identifying important habitat areas
- wetlands
- west slope of Glenwood Mountain
- grasslands and old fields
- upland forests and cliffs
- feeder stream from Lake Wallkill
- Bassetts Bridge area, including quarry pits 1/2 mile north
- pond, dam, and fields near office
- Pochuck Creek, Pochuck Basin
- right side of Lake Pochung Rd (towards Vernon)
- old railroad beds
- from Scott Rd, Franklin, to Wheatsworth Rd, Hamburg
- any large tract of undeveloped land in watershed

Planning Workbook Responses



Timber! Throughout the Wallkill River NWR, one can see the handiwork of busy beavers. Photo by Scott A. Vincent



The fisher kings. Great blue herons and other wading birds will benefit from wetlands restoration. USFWS photo

Wallkill, specific farms:

- 84 acre farm in Franklin, NJ; Corkhill Rd
- farm just north of Judge Beach Rd and adjacent to Lower Unionville Rd

Wallkill River Watershed, NY:

- near Orange County Park, through village of Montgomery
- near Middletown and Route 17, near landfills
- undeveloped lands adjacent to Refuge
- 4 mile river corridor from bridges in Galeville and Gardiner NY

Which options should the Service pursue in protecting important habitats that are not currently in a National Wildlife Refuge? (297 responses, including "other")

| | |
|------|-------------------------------|
| 76% | land acquisition |
| 52% | partnerships with land owners |
| 43% | habitat restoration |
| 41% | environmental education |
| 41% | purchasing development rights |
| 33% | work with conservation groups |
| 32% | conservation easements |
| 13% | grants programs |
| 0.3% | no active involvement |

How do you feel about the Service acquiring land from willing sellers? (272 responses)

| | |
|-----|---|
| 226 | approve (general) |
| 13 | approve, for the preservation of open space |
| 12 | expressed concern over restrictive access/usage |
| 6 | expressed concern based on financial considerations (eg. would seller get fair market value?) |
| 4 | approve, if properties are contiguous with other Refuge lands |
| 4 | expressed concern based on distrust of the Federal government |
| 3 | prefer conservation easements (for financial reasons) |
| 2 | expressed concern based on increased tax burdens |
| 1 | disapprove |
| 1 | mentioned possibility of past toxic dumping |

Are any of the following issues a concern to you? If so, please check your top three choices. (Many respondents checked more than three; 278 responses)

| | |
|-----|---|
| 67% | overdevelopment of fragile habitats |
| 53% | decreased water quality within the Wallkill River |
| 49% | fragmentation of important habitats |
| 41% | increased recreational use in sensitive habitat areas |
| 38% | lack of active management |
| 35% | invasion of exotic plant and animal species |

other responses:

- too much control by uninformed individuals or groups
- floodplain regulations not enforced
- restricted use; lack of access to "our land"
- overpopulation of certain wildlife species (bear, deer, resident Canada geese)
- not enough hunting opportunities
- noise pollution and light pollution in proximity to animal (and human) habitat
- lack of support from "pro-development" politicians
- hunting; "sensible management does not have to include killing"

Planning Workbook Responses



Majestic mountains. While striving to protect wildlife habitat, the Refuge also preserves some wonderful views. The Kittatinny Ridge provides the backdrop for the former Liberty Sod Farm, where the Appalachian Trail crosses the Refuge. USFWS photo.

Additional details on why issues in the preceding question concerned the reader (Responses were grouped and reworded, but not quantified. Open-ended question; 132 responses)

- loss of songbirds, invasion of non-native species
- water is the basic building block; good water quality is imperative
- poor local zoning; especially concerned with lack of zoning protection for wetlands
- critical to maintain and preserve large contiguous habitats
- Refuge should have minimal human presence; send people to parks
- need to protect eastern forests
- maintain the balance between allowing public use/access and protecting the environment
- development is destroying and fragmenting habitats
- invasive plants are a major problem
- more enforcement needed; concern with overuse
- non-wildlife dependent uses (motorized vehicles, trash dumping, dirt bikes) need to be curtailed
- concerned about future restricted use of Refuge



Shawangunk Grasslands NWR:

- invasive plants a significant problem at Galeville airport
- non wildlife dependent uses need to be eliminated (model airplanes, ATVs)
- fragmentation and overdevelopment are same problem; wildlife forced into smaller areas

Please include here any additional comments on conserving fish and wildlife habitats. (Responses were grouped and reworded, but not quantified. A comprehensive printout of responses is also available. Open-ended question; 82 responses)

Habitats galore! The Wallkill River NWR is a mosaic of habitat types: wetland (pictured above), grassland, hardwood forest, riverine, and shrub. The CCP will incorporate regional and ecosystem perspectives in determining how much of each habitat type to manage for. USFWS photo.



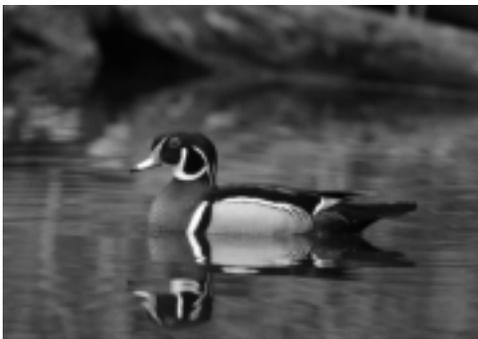
The Wallkill. Many people spoke passionately about the river during Open Houses and through Workbook responses. River issues included water quality, littering, canoe access, and fishing. USFWS photo.

- fish numbers have declined; fishing opportunities are being lost
- need to clean up debris in river
- glad to see emphasis on grassland birds
- need large contiguous areas protected close to, or connected with, Refuge
- concern with reduction in ruffed grouse; consider reintroduction
- increase land acquisition, but keep it open to sportsmen
- plant soybeans, milo, sorghum, clover, or corn for wildlife; leave through winter
- increase enforcement; enlist local police
- environmental education is critical
- protect borders of Refuge with easements, purchase of development rights, partnerships
- involve NJ Fish & Wildlife in management
- allow coyote hunting
- collect user fees
- implement a fish and wildlife stocking program
- curtail resident Canada goose population
- need adequate budget
- work with farmers to decrease herbicides, fertilizers; increase organic methods of weed control

Planning Workbook responses



Wood Duck Trail. *This trail allows visitors to observe wildlife at close range. USFWS photo.*



The namesake. *Wood ducks are a familiar presence along the Wood Duck Trail. USFWS photo.*



Eastern painted turtle. *This turtle is another species that you might view from the Wood Duck Trail. Photo by Scott A. Vincent*

Recreation, Education, and Access

Which of the following wildlife-dependent uses should be allowed on each Refuge?

| | Walkkill (283 responses) | Shawangunk (134 responses) |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| environ. education/interpretation | 90% | 91% |
| fishing | 82% | – |
| hunting | 68% | 50% |
| wildlife observation/photography | 94% | 91% |

other responses:

- walking/hiking
- trapping
- research
- no hunting/limits on hunting
- planting by hand of food bearing plants
- horseback riding, dog walking, bike riding
- classroom field trips
- canoeing

Are any of these activities, or the current levels of use on the Refuge, a concern to you? (Responses were grouped and reworded, but not quantified. A comprehensive printout of responses is also available. Open-ended question; 143 responses)

- hunting is a concern (killing, not compatible with “refuge”, impact on other public uses, safety, “pushing” of deer at Shawangunk, “allow only for management purposes”)
- hunting restrictions are too severe (want small-game hunting season)
- too many hunting permits; hunting programs too liberal
- limited fishing opportunities
- concern with fishing (not compatible with “refuge”)
- concern that observation and photography activities will interfere with hunting
- concern with future over-usage
- more environmental education/interp. needed
- Wood Duck trail is overused - people trample vegetation; insufficient hiking trails
- shouldn't have to bid for trapping rights
- gasoline powered vehicles bring noise and potential fuel spillage
- model airplanes and stunt planes should be eliminated

Do our recreational facilities meet your needs? (Open-ended question)

- 147 yes (approve)
- 21 more trails
- 11 more parking
- 8 more access
- 6 more river access
- 4 better maps needed (hunting/parking)
- 3 no (disapprove)
- 2 more parking (specifically mentioned Galeville)
- 2 more signs
- 1 too much parking
- 1 too many signs
- 1 wants tent camping

Planning Workbook responses

Additional comments on recreation, education, and public access. (Responses were grouped and reworded, but not quantified. Open-ended question; 91 responses)

- more hunting programs (turkey, small game, waterfowl, longer bow season)
- better trail system; more benches, blinds/viewing areas
- Wood Duck trail needs more patrol
- more environmental education; more interpretive programs
- more parking
- Appalachian Trail might be a way to reach people & teach them about the Service
- promote the Service; Earth Stewards Program
- promote volunteer opportunities
- integrate plan with Appalachian Trail, state and local parks
- signs should be readable approaching from either direction
- better canoe access; volunteers could maintain canoe access trails
- recreation should be limited, so as not to impact habitat; limit public access in sensitive areas; keep out pets, bikes, horses, hunters
- want bike trails, horse trails, carriage trails; want (leashed) dog walking
- limit development of Refuge, and concentrate on habitat conservation/restoration
- want more/better located parking for hunting
- hunter's maps should be colored, not white
- signs saying "hunt parking" are an advertisement to antihunters, could say "permit parking"
- keep services and access free
- permit boating activities

Shawangunk:

- allow model airplanes a few hours per week
- open Refuge to public use from early morning to late evening; coordinate law enforcement with local police
- need more environmental education at Shawangunk Grasslands NWR
- dog walking should be allowed

Summarized comments from Open Houses



Public involvement. *Open Houses were held in May and June in towns surrounding the Refuges. USFWS photo.*

Open Houses held in May and June helped us gain a better understanding of public opinion on issues affecting the Refuges. Comments on topics ranging from access to zoology were recorded during the meetings, and later condensed and sorted by topic.

Comments on major issues are included below. As with the Workbook responses, please remember that Open House comments have no statistical significance and do not represent Service policy.

Comments specific to Shawangunk Grasslands NWR:

- Allow small game hunting; allow deer hunting to control population
- Restrict usage of Refuge by aircraft
- Contaminants: look for fuel tanks, drainage ditches and used tires
- Try to locate town park away from Refuge
- Allow biking, horseback riding and dog walking on paved runways
- Concern over additional tax exempt lands in town
- Consider additional land protection around the Refuge
- Remove runways to improve grassland habitat
- Enforce restrictions on incompatible activities (drag racing, model airplanes, etc.)

Comments on the planning process:

- Local public wants to be involved in decision making
- How are comments from Open Houses utilized? Are decisions already made?

Comments on land acquisition/protection:

- Keep prime areas in agriculture; do not expand Refuge into black dirt areas
- Ensure that resources are not spread thin between Wallkill and Shawangunk; avoid acquiring disjunct tracts of land
- Presence of Refuges affects adjacent landowners – crop damage from beaver, deer, and geese residing on the Refuge
- Consider use of conservation easements
- Reuse or give away wood from condemned buildings on Refuge

Comments from Open Houses and meetings with conservation partners



Wildlife-dependent public use. *Hunting is one of the six priority, wildlife-dependent public uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. USFWS photo.*



Fishing. *Many people who fish on or near the Refuge mentioned water quality within the Wallkill River Watershed as a primary concern. USFWS photo.*

Additional Information/Comments

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ADA compliant materials will be provided upon request.

Habitat and wildlife management comments:

- Manage invasive/overabundant plant species: Russian olive, purple loosestrife, milkweed, Canada thistle
- Manage resident Canada goose population
- Consider keeping some areas in corn; cooperative farming
- Consider reintroduction of native fish
- Monitor effects of canoeing/kayaking on waterfowl
- Maintain existing grasslands
- Carefully consider ecological impacts of releasing beetles to control purple loosestrife
- Preserve water quality of Wallkill River; extend Refuge boundary to the north
- Manage ponds for water quality and vegetation structure

Public use comments:

- Consider opportunities for more trails and more access; convert more railroad beds into handicapped accessible trails
- Allow horses and dogs
- Allow jogging and bicycling
- Provide natural history information on Wallkill River
- Designate trails for specific uses (e.g. walking and hunting)
- More hunter parking; less hunter parking in residential areas
- Improve canoe access; do not over-promote canoe access
- Consider user fees
- Accommodate senior citizens and develop programs for children
- Organize a river cleanup with the Boy Scouts; utilize prison labor for maintenance and invasive weed pulling

Other sources of input

In addition to the Open Houses, we have been making a special effort to work with state agencies from both New York and New Jersey. On Sept. 21, we met with personnel from the NY Department of Environmental Conservation office in New Paltz. On Sept. 22, we met with personnel from NJ Department of Environmental Protection. These meetings focused on identifying additional land protection, individual species of concern, and key management issues to deal with in the CCP. We have invited representatives from each state's fish and wildlife agency to participate on our planning team.

Conservation partners such as The Nature Conservancy and the New Jersey Conservation Foundation have provided us with information on significant habitats and species locations.

This fall, we will continue to define a land protection strategy within the Wallkill River Watershed using the updated information on species and habitats recently obtained from our partners. We will also begin to design management alternatives to address the key issues identified on Page 3 of this Planning Update.

We are looking forward to May 2000 when we plan to release a draft CCP for public review. Feel free to contact us if you have additional information to share or would like to learn more about the CCP process.

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